



International Bear News

*Quarterly Newsletter of the
International Association for Bear Research and Management (IBA)
and IUCN/SSC Bear Specialist Group*

November 2009 Vol. 18 no. 4



© WCS Eastern Forest Survey Team

Now for some good news from Afghanistan ...
(See page 14.)

*IBA websites: www.bearbiology.org www.bearbiology.com
Ursus website: www.ursusjournal.com*

Bear Specialist Group

The Asiatic Black Bear Still Survives in Nuristan, Afghanistan

Stephane Ostrowski
Peter Zahler
Alex Dehgan
Kara Stevens
Maria Karlstetter
Peter Smallwood

Wildlife Conservation Society
Email contact: sostrowski@wcs.org

Although data on population sizes and trends are lacking for the Asiatic black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*) across great swathes of Asia, the documentation of widespread illegal killing – both retaliatory and especially for trade in parts for traditional medicines – combined with loss of habitat, support the conclusion that this species is likely declining in most parts of its range (IUCN 2008). Worldwide the species is listed as vulnerable.

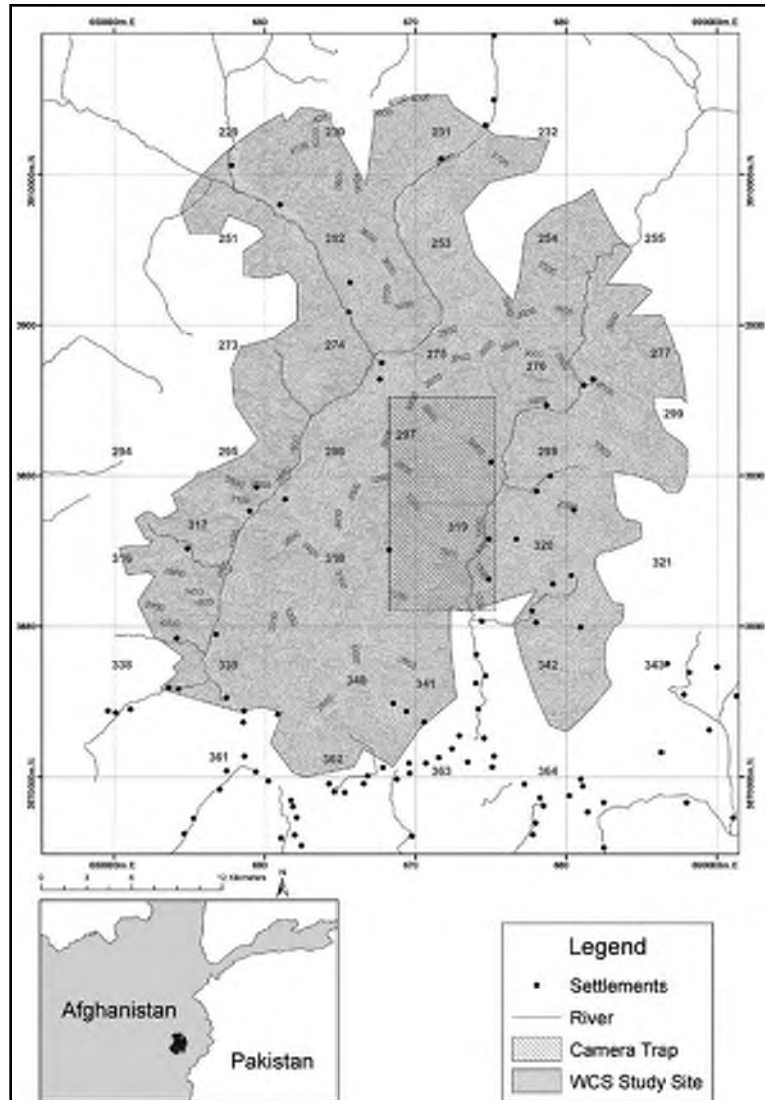
Little recent information exists about Asiatic black bears in western Asia (Gutleb and Ziaie 1999, Ahmadzadeh et al. 2008) and virtually nothing concerning its status in Afghanistan. Habibi (2003) declared the species threatened in the country based on observations made in the late 1970s and claimed that indiscriminate hunting had probably depleted the population in large parts of its range. Once occurring across most of eastern Afghanistan, nowadays it is said to subsist only in isolated pockets of forests in remote parts of the eastern provinces. Based on these indications, on the occasional occurrence of cubs for sale in eastern Afghanistan and on the presence of four young adult specimens at the Kabul zoo, allegedly procured as cubs from the central part of Nuristan province, in December 2006, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) launched a series of wildlife surveys to detect the presence of Asiatic black bears in south-central

Nuristan on the border with Kunar province (see map). The study was conducted in the framework of the WCS Biodiversity Conservation Program, a wider conservation initiative in Afghanistan implemented by WCS and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Between December 2007 and December 2008, evidence of the Asiatic black bear was found in Nuristan at altitudes ranging from 1,700 to 2,600 m, consisting of 19 direct sightings and numerous scats and tracks. Using camera traps, the species was

photographed on 44 occasions during November and December 2007 in deciduous, coniferous and evergreen oak forests.

Black bears appeared widespread in the study site, and although we still lack actual data on their abundance, survey teams composed of local people considered them numerous. Paradoxically, this status may result from habitat degradation in adjacent districts. In Nuristan the species certainly suffers habitat loss in the east of the province, which has experienced a dramatic decline of its forested range in recent years due to illegal logging



WCS study site (shaded area) and camera trapping area (square blocks) where Asiatic black bears were detected in Nuristan Province, Afghanistan.



Dr Ali, who led the WCS survey team in Nuristan in 2008, with two orphaned Asiatic black bear cubs recovered from a local resident in central Nuristan, Afghanistan, May 2008. Bear cubs are occasionally captured and kept as pets or sold to Pakistan, usually after killing the mother bear.

activities (UNEP 2003). It is therefore possible that central Nuristan, still relatively preserved from illegal logging, has received in recent years the input of immigrant animals from neighboring areas where forests have vanished. Alternatively, overall habitat degradation may be forcing the few remaining bears into more frequent contact with local people, resulting in the perception of abundance.

In the survey site, the Asiatic black bear currently suffers retaliatory killings for its predation on livestock and raiding crops (Drs Ali and Rita, pers. obs.). Besides the current lack of security and armed conflict in the region, which renders short-term conservation measures difficult to implement on the ground, major long-term challenges for the successful conservation of the Asiatic black bear in central Nuristan include continued habitat loss and fragmentation, insufficient natural resource management regimes at the local level, little to no management at the central level, and the increasing pressure of illegal armed loggers.

Acknowledgements

The data presented were collected by the following people: Abdullah Mayar Nuristani, Ahamad Farid Rawan, Mohammad Ismaheel Tauheed, Bahadur Khan Hamdard, Hemmad Zaher, Mohammad Joma,

Hemat, Ghulam Haidir, Abdul Qahar, Abdul Haq, and Mohammad Jamal. Rohullah Sanger, WCS Afghanistan GIS Analyst, provided his skills to create the map.

Literature Cited

- Ahmadzadeh F., H. Liaghati, B. H. Kiabi, A. R. Mehrabian, A. Abdoli, and H. Mostafavi. 2008. The status and conservation of the Asiatic black bear in Nikshahr county, Baluchistan District of Iran. *Journal of Natural History* 42:2379-2387.
- Gutleb, B. and H. Ziaie. 1999. On the distribution and status of the brown bear, *Ursus arctos*, and the Asiatic black bear, *U. thibetanus*, in Iran. *Zoology in the Middle East* 18:5-8.
- Habibi K. 2003. Mammals of Afghanistan. Zoo Outreach Organisation, Coimbatore, India, 168 + vi pp.
- IUCN 2008. 2008 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. <www.iucnredlist.org>. Downloaded on 24 March 2009.
- UNEP 2003 Afghanistan. Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment. United Nations Environment Programme, Nairobi, Kenya. ISBN 92-1-158617-8. 🐻



Asiatic black bear camera-trapped in the central-south part of Nuristan province, Afghanistan, November 2007.